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ABSTRACT

The acquisition order of English morphemes by adult second language learners from Asian language backgrounds was investigated. It was hypothesized that adult speakers of the noninflected Asian languages, having passed the critical stage for second language acquisition without having mastered the linguistic concept of morphology, might face an impediment to the acquisition of English. This impediment was investigated as the "Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier" hypothesis. The subjects were 159 native speakers of noninflected languages enrolled in high school and college English as a second language classes. They each completed three contextual passages from which morphemes had been deleted. The results demonstrated an order of acquisition which significantly differed from that found in previous studies in which a universal morpheme acquisition order was observed. It was concluded that a universal order of acquisition cannot be generalized to adult native speakers of noninflected languages. However, the subjects who had learned an inflected language prior to learning English evidenced an acquisition order of English morphemes similar to that found in previous studies. Findings supported the "Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier" hypothesis. (Author/RW)

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ASIAN READERS: THE MORPHEME CONCEPTUALIZATION BARRIER

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ABSTRACT

ASIAN READERS:
THE MORPHEME CONCEPTUALIZATION BARRIER

This study was conducted to investigate the acquisitional ordering of English morphemes by adult speakers whose native languages were non-inflected. Previous studies had evidenced a universal order of acquisition of morphemes by all speakers, regardless of age or native language.

The researcher theorized that adult speakers of non-inflected languages, having passed the critical stage for second language acquisition without having mastered the linguistic concept of morphology, might be faced with an acquisitional impediment. This impediment was investigated as the Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier Hypothesis.

One hundred fifty-nine subjects, native speakers of non-inflected languages, completed three contextual passages from which morphemes had been deleted.

The order of acquisition differed significantly from that evidenced by previous studies. Results indicated that the universal order of acquisition cannot be generalized to adult native speakers of non-inflected languages. Eighteen subjects who had learned an inflected language prior to their acquisition of English, however, evidenced an order of acquisition of English morphemes which was highly correlated with previous studies. Findings gave credence to the Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier Hypothesis.

ASIAN READERS:
THE MORPHEME CONCEPTUALIZATION BARRIER

The number of Asian speaking students in American schools has multiplied drastically in the past decade. Reading teachers have often been frustrated in their attempts to teach comprehension strategies to these students, unaware that a psycholinguistic barrier to comprehension causes unique problems for Asian readers. Recently, several major language acquisition studies have provided educators with essential knowledge about the way in which language is acquired, and ultimately, about the perceptual strategies employed by second language learners in their attempts to retrieve meaning from text.

Review of the Literature

Two major studies examined the way in which children acquire a first language (Brown, 1973; DeVilliers & DeVilliers, 1974). Dulay and Burt (1974) investigated the way in which children acquire the morphemes of a second language. Their subjects were Spanish (an inflected language) and Chinese (a non-inflected language). Since all of their subjects' ages were far below the critical stage for language acquisition (Lenneberg, 1967), that study's result could not be generalized to the population of adult native speakers of non-inflected languages who were trying to acquire an inflected second language. Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) followed with a study which examined the second language acquisition of adults. They used subjects of divergent language systems, dividing them into Spanish and non-Spanish speakers. Although diverse languages were included in the non-Spanish group, few of the subjects were speakers of non-inflected languages.

The non-inflected language speaker has no concept of the linguistic notion of morphology, since non-inflected languages do not use morphemes to semantically alter individual words, either internally or by affix. Since these speakers did not have the concept of morphology prior to acquiring an inflected second language, a question arose as to whether, if examined in large numbers, these adult speakers would be shown to acquire the morphemes of English in the universal order which had been proposed by Dulay and Burt (1974), Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974), and again in a study of adult second language acquisition which was conducted by Larsen-Freeman. Since no study had evidenced a universal order of acquisition for adult second language learners who were native speakers of non-inflected languages, a research hypothesis termed the Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier Hypothesis was proposed to determine whether a psycholinguistic barrier to comprehension existed for these speakers, and

plans to conduct this study began.

Subjects

The one hundred fifty-nine subjects, adult native speakers of inflected languages who were enrolled in high school and college ESL classes, ranged in age from sixteen to forty-five. Those eighteen subjects who had acquired an inflected second language (French) prior to their acquisition of English were analyzed separately, since they had previously acquired the concept of morphology. Their mean reading comprehension level was sixth grade, fourth month.

Instrumentation and Methodology

All subjects completed three contextual passages from which morphemes had been deleted. A sample passage (fourth grade level) and two graded passages (fourth and sixth grade levels) each contained sixteen deletions, eliciting two examples of each of the eight morphemes being examined. Contextual instrumentation was selected because it stringently controlled elicitation (multiple solutions were eliminated after two pilot studies), because it elicited morphemes in discourse, and because it allowed the researcher to examine function as well as form. A demographic survey and the sample passage were completed by groups with assistance from the researcher. The two graded passages were completed by subjects individually.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analysis was conducted utilizing appropriately prepared computer sources. Those comparisons which could only be made by rank -- specifically, those comparisons of the results of two major acquisitional ordering studies in adult second language acquisition with the results of the present study -- were calculated with Spearman Rank-Order Correlation. Other calculations were made by the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation method, provided numberical data were available. The morpheme which was supplied correctly the greatest number of times was placed at the top of the acquisitional hierarchy, since its difficulty level, or level of suppliance, indicated that it posed the least problem for ESL students. In that way, a hierarchy was established, and was compared with the hierarchies which had resulted from previous studies which had investigated the acquisition of English morphemes by ESL learners.

Conclusions

The hierarchy of morphemes acquired by subjects of this study did not

significantly correlate with the results of previous second language acquisition studies. On the contrary, results were significantly dissimilar. Furthermore, subjects who had learned an inflected language (French) prior to their acquisition of English were shown to acquire the morphemes of English in an order significantly similar to the Universal Order of Acquisition evidenced in previous studies. Thus, it was concluded that those subjects who have acquired the concept of morphology prior to acquiring an inflected language will do so in a universal order, or a natural sequence. Those who attempt to acquire an inflected second language as adults will acquire the morphemes of that language in a significantly different order, since they have not previously acquired the linguistic concept of morphology, and are impeded by the Morpheme Conceptualization Barrier.

Implications for Reading Teachers of Asian Students

Those students whose native language was one of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family, which includes isolative, non-inflected, monosyllabic languages (Cambodian, Chinese, Vietnamese), must certainly use different perceptual strategies in their attempts to comprehend text. Some specific examples of answers supplied by subjects on the contextual passage task help to reveal the linguistic processing used by subjects. For example, twenty-two individual subjects supplied up in the following sentence: At dawn, Jody awaken _____.

An awareness of the overall context reveals the necessity to supply the past tense marker, -ed, in the deleted position. However, since the subjects' native language does not utilize inflection for tense, the concept of tense is not associated with the verb. These speakers comprehend time within discourse, or within context, and the same verb form can be used to express past, present, or future time. The fact that an individual would not feel a necessity to supply the past tense marker in the deleted position is not surprising. But the fact that a large percentage of subjects supplied up in the deleted position is more revealing. Even though the correct morpheme was not supplied, the selection of up indicates that subjects were comprehending the passage.

Some other examples can further illustrate subjects' comprehension of a passage in spite of their inability to supply the correct morphemes:

1. Jody made two wish ___. (es deleted; long plural)
   Jody made two wish now.
2. The barn door was bang ___. (-ing deleted; progressive)
   The barn door was bang hard.

If the perceptual strategies employed by native speakers of non-inflected languages carry over to their cognitive processing of an inflected language (Cowan, 1965) one might conclude that their acquisition of the inflections of the second language will be slow and tedious. They are required to develop new linguistic concepts as they acquire an inflected language, whereas most second language learners need simply substitute one surface structure for another. It is the contention of the researcher that native speakers of non-inflected languages may read the second language with minimal comprehension by applying the perceptual strategies which had been employed for comprehension in their native languages. In other words, if individuals' native languages do not use inflection for semantic refinement or alteration, those readers are likely to ignore the morphemes of a second language in their attempts to derive meaning from print.

For example, the possessive marker (-'s)indicates ownership to a speaker and reader of English, whereas non-inflected languages express ownership only through context. If a reader has established a cognitive tactic for comprehending the notion of ownership, and that tactic is based solely on syntax, that reader may perceive the phrase "the dog Ø bone" as one which indicates the dog's possession of a bone (Ø indicates deletion). The subject is not dependent on the possessive marker (-'s) either orally or in print. Therefore, when "the dog's bone" is encountered, non-inflected language speakers are likely to ignore the possessive marker, employing instead the perceptual strategies developed for comprehension in their native language. In this case, the syntactic placement of "dog" before "bone" indicates ownership, and the possessive marker, being redundant, is not necessary for comprehension.

It might appear, then, that Asian readers read English text with comprehension, even though they seem to ignore English's morphology in their attempts at comprehension. The fact that they appear to ignore morphology, however, presents an immense problem. The refinement, alteration, intensification, and extension of meaning which morphology provides the English language is absolutely essential to the complete comprehension of English text. Until teachers of Asian students become aware of the psycholinguistic phenomena which cause Asian readers to employ such radically different perceptual strategies in their attempts at comprehension, they will not understand the importance of emphasizing the concept of morphology in teaching Asian students to read.

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